

### 3

## Expect to Get Your Students There

Effort-based ability is the belief that all students can do rigorous academic work at high standards, even if they are far behind academically and need a significant amount of time to catch up. Educators who carry this belief into their practice are not unrealistic about the obstacles they and their students face. They simply have not given up.

*Jonathan Saphier*

A few years ago, I was leading a workshop on rigor. My audience was a group of high school teachers in a large school district and I was helping them to differentiate their instructional practices so that they could help all of their students access more rigorous content. Early into my presentation, I could tell that the teachers were merely counting the minutes until the break. Many of them sat scowling with their arms crossed, others doodled on the workshop materials, surreptitiously completed crossword puzzles, or read the newspaper. A few even muttered under their breath to each other. Things were not going well.

About fifteen minutes into my presentation, I decided to take a different tack. "I'm going to stop here for a moment because I realize that I have committed one of the cardinal sins of presenting," I said as I turned off my PowerPoint

presentation. "I assumed that there was basic agreement about the premise of my presentation and clearly there is not. So, let's back up a bit."

That got a few people's attention. They stopped whispering among themselves and eyed me curiously. "How many of you are here because you have to be here?" I asked. The teachers smiled sheepishly and then raised their hands. "Ahh," I smiled. "Well, since you have to be here anyway, we might as well make it worth your while. Why don't you tell me what you want to get out of this workshop today."

The teachers shifted uncomfortably in their seats and shuffled their materials nervously. Some checked the agenda and looked at the clock. Practicing good "wait time," I leaned against the front table and let an uncomfortable silence hang over the room. Finally, one brave soul raised his hand. "Look, you seem like you have worked hard on this presentation but the problem isn't that we need more strategies. *I know* how to teach my biology class. The problem is the kids. They aren't motivated. Some of them don't even have the basic skills they need. How am I going to increase the rigor when they can't or won't do the work I give them now?"

Before I could respond, another teacher piped in. "These kids today have so many other distractions. They have MySpace and they text each other all the time. The last thing they are interested in is *Julius Caesar*."

"Yeah," said another teacher. "How am I going to increase the rigor of my course when my kids won't even do their homework? I teach world history and I could assign reading but my kids won't do it. We are so far behind in the curriculum that I worry they won't be ready for the semester exam coming up in a month. I can't worry about rigor right now. I am just trying to drag them through the curriculum."

I stood there and listened to their concerns. Finally, I said, "Although we began this conversation talking about rigor, it sounds like we need to spend some time talking about expectations."

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, eyes began to roll. A teacher raised his hand. "I don't need another lecture about how I am supposed to have high expectations of my students. If you saw my syllabus you would see that I have very high expectations for what they need to do in my course. But, no matter how high my expectations are, the students cannot reach them. I would guess that at least 60 percent of my students will never earn higher than a *D* in my course, not because I don't have high expectations, but

because they come to me so far behind and they won't do the work." Other teachers nodded in agreement.

I smiled. "Don't worry. I am not going to lecture you on how you must have high expectations of your students. But, I do think we need to take a look at our expectations of ourselves." I walked to my laptop and turned it off. "Why don't you put away your workshop materials for a moment and we will come back to them this afternoon," I said as I picked up a dry erase marker and walked to the whiteboard. "Now tell me. What do we mean when we say 'high expectations?'"

## Common Practice

We have all have been taught that teachers are supposed to hold students to high expectations. Unfortunately, no one explains how we go about doing that. Do we repeat to ourselves the mantra "All students can learn" over and over until we can say it with conviction? Do we manufacture a blind belief in our students even when all evidence is to the contrary? Do we teach the students we wish we had and ignore the students we do have?

So many teachers struggle with high expectations because, in many cases, in order to have high expectations of students, you have to ignore or at least tune out the students in front of you. If, for instance, you are teaching a calculus class, and your students cannot multiply or divide whole numbers, it is difficult to expect that they are going to master calculus by the end of the year. The gap between what the students know and what they will need to know seems too wide. If, after 11 or 12 years of school they have not mastered the basic skills, what would make anyone think they are going to master other, much more complex skills by the end of a short semester or year?

And yet, we are told that we must, that indeed the very key to reaching these students is to first have high expectations of them. On what do we base these expectations? Certainly we can't always base them on the evidence in front of us, especially when that evidence directly contradicts what it is we are supposed to believe about students. Do we base our expectations on the belief that students have an innate ability to learn? Do we doggedly hold onto that belief even when we are confronted with students who do not seem to be able or motivated to learn?



### Yes, but... I already have high standards.

Interestingly enough, most teachers believe that they have high expectations for their students, but when you examine what they are saying, what they really mean is that they have high standards for their students. It's a subtle but important difference.

The difference between an expectation and a standard is that the standard is the bar and the expectation is our belief about whether students will ever reach the bar. Standards are the external criteria against which a product is evaluated. A standard does not tell us anything about our beliefs. What we believe about the standard, however, determines our expectations.

One common approach to raising teacher expectations is to impose or raise the standards by which students and teachers will be evaluated. Proponents of this approach argue that by adopting a common set of standards, teachers will be very clear about what students are expected to know and be able to do. They assume low expectations result from a poor understanding of what mastery is. This approach, however, is fundamentally flawed.

As Judith Lloyd Yero (2002) argues in her book *Teaching in Mind: How Teacher Thinking Shapes Education* and on her Web site at [www.teachersmind.com/standards.htm](http://www.teachersmind.com/standards.htm), "It is possible to have extremely high expectations without any standards whatsoever. Conversely, it is possible to have very low expectations—even when the external standards are extremely high."

Raising standards is not the same thing as raising expectations. Holding students accountable for more and more information does not change what we believe about a particular student's ability to master that information.

There is no cause and effect relationship between raising standards and raising expectations. Just because you raise your standards does not mean that you have also altered your belief about whether your students will be able to meet your standards. In fact, the opposite may happen. If you do not believe that students are able to meet your prior standards, how can you believe that they will be able to meet your new, higher standards? Higher standards then may actually lower expectations.

Typically, most staff development models built around expectations have focused on changing teacher beliefs. They argue that the way to change teacher beliefs is for teachers to "fake it before they make it." In other words,

teachers are to pretend that they have high expectations for students even when they don't. They are advised to behave as if they believe in students by doing such things as nodding encouragingly when students are answering questions, praising students liberally, and providing more wait time. The argument goes that students will be convinced by this act and rise to the level of our feigned expectations.

But this is one of the most harmful pieces of advice out there. The problem with this approach is that if you only adjust your behavior without first changing your perspective, sooner or later, your true expectations will leak through. Because an expectation is a belief that something will happen, your behavior will reveal what you truly believe. If I believe that it will rain today, I will take an umbrella with me to work. If I don't believe that it will rain today, I leave the umbrella at home. If you truly believe that students will not meet your objectives, then that belief will play out in your interactions with students.

## The Principle

Simply put, an expectation is the confidence that something will happen. When we say that we have high expectations for our students, we typically mean that we are confident that our students will master the material that we are teaching.

Expectation is also a mathematical term. In math, an expectation is what you get when you multiply the probability of an occurrence and the value of that occurrence. I like that definition because it has a lot to say about the way we teach. According to this definition, our expectations are the result of our beliefs about how likely something will happen combined with how much we value what we hope will happen.

Expectations, then, are based on both our beliefs and our values. If you want to raise your expectations of students, you must first understand how values and beliefs interact.

Beliefs are what we think is true. We use beliefs to make judgments about ourselves, others, and the world around us. Because a belief is a generalization based on our experience, what we believe about our students is based on what we see and how we see them. The same goes for our belief in our own abilities. If we have experienced success with a certain type of student in the

past, we are more likely to believe that we will be successful with that same type of student in the future. The opposite is also true. If we have not been successful with a certain type of student in the past, we are more likely to believe that we will fail with that type of student when we meet her again.

Values are what we think something is worth. They are based on the principles and qualities that we think have intrinsic worth. Values are at the heart of what motivates us because they help us decide what is important. Your values tell you to do something because it is important regardless of whether you always think it is possible.

Our expectations are the intersection between what we believe about our teaching situation and our own abilities to handle it and what we believe is important. We can only have high expectations of our students if we believe that it is possible that we can help our students and if we believe that it is important to do so.

In George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion*, Professor Henry Higgins brags that he can take a poor girl with a heavy Cockney accent, who sells flowers on the street, and turn her into a lady. He enters into a bet with his friend Colonel Pickering to pass off Eliza Doolittle as a refined lady at the Embassy ball, and then sets out to train her in the speech and etiquette of the upper class. He is so successful that Eliza exceeds his expectations. Not only is she able to pass as a member of the upper class, she is able to enter the middle class and marry into one of its most pretentious families.

The play is based on the ancient Greek myth recorded by Ovid. In this myth, a sculptor creates a work of art so beautiful that he falls in love with his own creation. He loves the sculpture as if it was a real woman—even to the point of kissing it and buying it presents—until one day, the goddess Aphrodite changes the sculpture into a real woman.

We educators use the term "The Pygmalion Effect" to describe what happens when teachers hold students to high expectations. The idea is that if teachers have high expectations for students, the students will rise to the level of the teacher's expectations. We are taught that if we just believe that our students can achieve, our students will meet our expectations, despite their background, their skill level, even their own motivation. In fact, an entire branch of the movie industry has been devoted to depicting the great teacher, the one who walks into a chaotic inner city classroom and just believes in the students. The students give the super teacher a hard time at first but are soon



won over by the teacher's determination and belief in them. Forty-five minutes and a few wrenching scenes later, the students have become scholars.



Yes, but no matter how talented I am, I can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear.

It's hard sometimes to have high expectations of ourselves when our students come to us with so many learning needs. Juxtaposing where they are to where the curriculum says they need to be by the end of the year can seem overwhelming. It's almost as if we are being asked to perform a miracle.

But it is at times like these that we need to hold ourselves to high expectations even more. We look at the reality of our circumstances—our students are reading three grades below grade level, they have such poor skills that they cannot complete even the simplest of tasks, they are rarely in school—and we figure out how we can best mitigate these circumstances. Remember the metaphor of Pygmalion the sculptor. When the sculptor first meets the hunk of rock, it is difficult to imagine that rock as a beautiful work of art. But the sculptor works at it a little at a time, a chip here, an adjustment there, until slowly things begin to take shape. The same goes with teaching.

It may help to divide your goals into smaller goals and focus on these. Instead of trying to tackle everything at once, focus on those skills that will make the biggest difference for students and start there. Chapter 2 discusses this process in more detail.

This explanation of the Pygmalion effect, however, is not consistent with the Pygmalion myths. *Pygmalion* is not about a professor's or a sculptor's blind belief in his subject; *Pygmalion* is about the professor's and the sculptor's blind belief in their own talent. Professor Higgins does not care about Eliza's background, or her parents, or her own innate ability. The bet is about *his* ability to take anyone and turn her into something better. The Pygmalion of Ovid's story does not fall in love with just any statue. He falls in love with a statue of his own making.

What makes the Pygmalion effect so powerful in the classroom is not the dogged belief in our students' abilities, as we have been taught in our

education courses. What makes the Pygmalion effect powerful is our belief in our own ability to take anyone (such as a poor Cockney flower girl) or anything (such as a cold lump of marble) and turn it into something so magnificent that we fall in love with it ourselves.

Notice the pattern here. First, the professor and the artist begin with a piece of raw material and a vision of what they can do with that raw material. They then set out to work. Once they have finished, they fall in love with their creation because it exceeds even what they believed they could do. We want to fall in love *before* we have created anything. We are waiting to believe in our students *before* we get to work. That's not the way the Pygmalion effect works. The professor and the artist begin by having a vision of what it is they will create. They go to work believing that they will end up with a masterpiece, not because the raw material they are working with has some innate potential, but because of the power of their own ability to create a masterpiece.

## Practicing the Principle

Mastery teaching means understanding that expectations say more about your own sense of efficacy than they do about your students' abilities. Therefore, master teachers start by examining their expectations of themselves and shift their focus from what the *students* can do to what *they* can do. They apply the Stockdale paradox, simultaneously confronting the brutal facts of their reality while maintaining unwavering faith that they will find a way to prevail with all of their students.

## Remember That It's Ultimately About You, Not the Students

Students pick up on our expectations fairly quickly. They then formulate judgments about the kind of teacher we are and decide how hard they will work in our classroom. I have seen students work their tails off for teachers who expected it and the same students barely register a pulse for other teachers—who expected that. It's true. Students rise to the level of our expectations.

But what we rarely consider is that we also rise to the level of our own expectations. If we believe that we can reach a student, we pull out all the stops and do everything within our power to make sure that student is successful. If we are confident in our ability to teach our subject, we share ownership of a student's failure or success. If however, we tell ourselves that there



is no way to help these students, we stop trying. If we are not confident in our ability to help students, we lower our expectations to goals that we feel we can comfortably achieve.

Thus, low expectations say more about what you think of your own abilities than they do about what you think of your students' abilities. When you say that you don't think the students can achieve a goal, what you are really saying is that you don't think that you have the skills to help them achieve it.

Some of us err by either not having a rigorous enough program to begin with or having a rigorous program but spending the year not expecting students to reach the goals we've set. Both approaches assume that students can't do the work, one by setting the bar too low and the other by setting the bar high but accepting that students will never jump over it.

Others of us mask our low expectations under the guise of "accepting reality." We argue that rather than blindly—and futilely—believing that students will master the course content, we have accepted a more realistic view and will simply work with students where they are without burdening the students, or ourselves, with false hope.

Both approaches grow out of frustration from years of disappointed expectations, and yet many people vilify these teachers for having low expectations. They argue that these teachers are elitists, or racists, or have simply given up.

I believe that the problem is much more complex than that. The more I work with teachers, the more I understand that lowered expectations are really a self-protective measure. They are designed to reduce the gap between our own understanding about what good teaching should be and our perceptions about our ability to teach effectively given our current teaching situation. Regardless of the reason we give for low expectations, low expectations always say more about our confidence in our own abilities than they do about our confidence in the students. If you want to raise your expectations of your students, you first have to raise your expectations of yourself.

I was working with a group of middle school teachers on how to effectively support struggling students. We were discussing developing intervention plans for students so that we could help them before they needed extensive remediation when I noticed Katherine, an algebra teacher, roll her eyes.

"What is it Katherine?" I asked.



Yes, but... shouldn't we hold the students accountable for something?

It often seems as if students are being held less and less accountable for their own learning and teachers are being held more and more accountable. But holding yourself to high expectations does not take any of the responsibility away from the students. Holding yourself to high expectations is about a disposition toward students and toward teaching. It is not about taking on the students' responsibility to do the work; it is about developing and believing in your own ability to move students to where they need to be in spite of where they are.

Developing this belief requires you to insist that students complete their work, and that they complete it in a way that meets the standards. *If we want students to be more accountable, then we have to insist that they do what accountable people do.* In this way, holding yourself to high expectations actually allows you to hold students more accountable. We'll talk about this more in chapter 7, "Never Work Harder Than Your Students."

"What good is an intervention plan when some of these kids are so far behind that they will never catch up?"

"What makes you think they will never catch up?" I wanted to know.

"Because," she sighed. "They are just too far behind. I've got state tests coming up and I have no time to help them catch up on the things they didn't learn before they got to me. Besides, I have a curriculum to get through by the end of the year and there just isn't enough time to do it all. I am killing myself as it is."

I listened to Katherine's explanation and asked, "Do you think that the students are capable of doing any better?"

Katherine thought for a moment. "I know I am supposed to say that I believe that they can, but to be honest, I just don't. I have done my best with them and yet they still don't get it. I even offer to stay after with them and they just don't show up. I am starting to think that they just can't handle the work. Maybe they don't belong in an algebra class."

Katherine's comments are typical of a lot of teachers. She faced external constraints and pressures, and she felt she was working as hard as she could

with her students. And yet, she was still not able to move the students forward to where the curriculum guides and the state tests said they should be. She had done her best, so the problem must be with the students.

But, when you dig a little more deeply, you see that Katherine's frustrations had more to do with her own constraints than it did with her students' abilities. *She* was pressured. *She* didn't have enough time. *She* had done all she could and had not seen any results. So, *they* must be the problem. Katherine's assessment of what the students could do came only after she had been unsuccessful with all she knew how to do.

I asked Katherine to take a look at her expectations, not of the students, but of herself. "Do you believe that you could help the students master the material by the end of the year?"

"No," she shook her head. "They are just too far behind."

"How far behind are they really? I mean, what is it that they don't know that they need to know in order to pass the test at the end of the year?"

Katherine was beginning to get annoyed. "They don't know the basics. They have trouble adding and subtracting, multiplying, and dividing. They don't study. They don't know how to take notes."

"Katherine," I asked gently. "Could you teach them those things?"

Katherine looked at me and I could tell that she was trying to figure out where I was headed. "Sure, I could teach them those things," she began slowly, "but I shouldn't have to."

"I know you shouldn't have to Katherine, but do you believe that those things are important?"

"Yes."

"Could your students learn algebra if they had those skills?"

"Yes."

"How long will it take you to review those skills with your students?"

"I don't know," she hedged. "Not long, I suppose."

"Are there ways that you could teach those skills and still move through your curriculum? Mini-lessons, perhaps, or an intensive review?"

"I guess I could do something like that," she conceded grudgingly.

Now the conversation had shifted from what the students couldn't do to what Katherine could do. Rather than focus on the problem, we were now focused on how Katherine could solve the problem. That's the difference between looking at expectations in terms of your expectations for yourself

versus your expectations for your students. The question shifts from "can I teach these students?" to "HOW can I teach these students?" Rather than be disheartened by constraints outside of your control, suddenly, you see what you can do to make a difference.

### Try This

- Find another teacher in your building who has been successful with your students. Brainstorm strategies with that teacher, collaboratively plan, and participate in peer observation so that you can both learn from and support each other in developing strategies to help you be successful with your students.
- Use the following questions suggested by Rick DuFour (Dufour, Eaker, & Dufour, 2005) to develop a plan you can use to be successful with your students.
  1. What is it I want students to learn?
  2. How will I know when they have learned it?
  3. How will I respond when a student experiences difficulty learning?These three questions will keep the focus on you and what you can do to help students be successful.
- Rather than trying to solve every challenge at once, go for a "quick win." Find one student with whom you can succeed, or one lesson that you know you can make effective. Try one new thing you learned at a conference or a workshop or in this book that you feel the most confident of being successful. Starting small will not only build your confidence, it will help you learn from your small victories and apply the new skills toward achieving larger victories. From here, you can continue to add to your list of wins by tackling more and more difficult challenges.

### Understand the Anatomy of an Expectation

In his best selling book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins (1991), talks about what he calls the Stockdale Paradox. The idea of the Stockdale Paradox grew out of a conversation Collins had with Admiral Jim Stockdale who was a prisoner of war for eight years during the Vietnam War. Stockdale was able to not only survive unspeakable torture but also organize the other prisoners so that they could survive as well. During the conversation with Stockdale, Collins asked Stockdale what kind of prisoner didn't make it out of the prison camps. "Oh that's easy," replied Stockdale. "The optimists."

The optimists? Why the optimists? It would seem that the optimists would be the ones who held onto hope in spite of the bleak circumstances. Wouldn't it pay to maintain optimism?

Not necessarily. In fact, as Stockdale explained, optimism could actually create despair. The optimists in prison would focus on a specific outcome, such as getting out by Christmas. When Christmas came and went, and they were still in prison, the optimists would lose hope. Many died not from the torture, but from the broken hearts that came with repeated disappointment. As Stockdale warned, "You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be" (Collins, 2001, p. 85).

Many teachers suffer from the same misplaced optimism, the same false hope that comes from believing that they and their students will be successful without also confronting the brutal facts of their current reality. We cannot hold onto high expectations for students without also considering the reality of who they are and what they are able to do.

The Stockdale Paradox is the idea that in order to make it "you must maintain unwavering faith that you can and will prevail in the end, regardless of the difficulties," AND at the same time have the discipline to "confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be" (Collins, 2001, p. 86).



#### Yes, but... I have lost my faith

Sometimes the brutal facts of your reality are so overwhelming that it is difficult to tap into your values and bolster your faith. Sometimes, things are so rough that it is hard to remember why it is you went into teaching in the first place. You need inspiration, but you are hard-pressed to find it.

In times like these, several things may help. You can spend some time reflecting on your successes. Are there times when you have prevailed with a student and seen the results? Can you remember how it felt? Focus on that feeling and ask yourself what you did in that situation to produce that feeling.

You can also read something inspiring. I recommend Parker J. Palmer's *The Courage to Teach*, which takes you through a stage-by-stage process that helps you recover your passion for teaching.

Although Collins uses this principle to explain why some companies are able to make the move from good to great and others are not, I think this principle also holds the key to adjusting our expectations. In order to raise our expectations, we must develop an unwavering faith that we will prevail with our students (values) and at the same time have the discipline to confront the reality of the students in front of us (beliefs). The next two sections will go into more detail about how we can do just that.

### Try This

- To understand your core values, try this exercise: Make a list of the 10 most important attributes of a teacher (i.e. integrity, love, truthfulness, kindness, wisdom, ability to manage a classroom effectively, intelligence, charisma, sense of humor). Then, go back over your list. Cross out the three characteristics that are least important to you. Next, narrow the list to five by crossing out two more characteristics. Then, narrow the list to three by crossing out two more characteristics. Finally, of that list choose the two that are the most important to you. These represent your core values in teaching for which you are so passionate that you would never give them up. Next, examine whether your current teaching practice reflects your core values.
- To understand what it is you truly believe, pay attention to both your assessment of your teaching situation and your assessment of your own abilities to handle that situation. On one side of a sheet of paper, list your teaching strengths. At what parts of teaching are you really good? On the other side of the paper, list all of the constraints of your current teaching situation. Now compare your two lists. Do you believe that your teaching strengths are enough to overcome your constraints? Are there some constraints that are too overwhelming given your current teaching abilities? What strengths might you need to develop to overcome any constraints you face?
- Based on your assessment of your beliefs and values, determine where you need to work first—values or beliefs—by figuring out which one currently has more sway on your expectations for yourself and your students. If you have trouble identifying your values or if your values are not currently reflected in your teaching practice, work on the values side first. If you find that you have trouble believing that you can help all of your students achieve



at high levels, work on the beliefs side of the equation first. The next two sections will show you how.

### Adopt an Unwavering Faith in Yourself and in the Importance of Your Work

Unwavering faith is the values side of the equation because our faith can only be as strong as our values. If we believe that what we are doing is important, then we are more likely to believe that there must be a way for us to prevail with our students and that we will find it.

We get into trouble when we base our faith on our external circumstances. We cannot base our faith on what happens outside of us. To do so would be to leave our faith vulnerable to the fluctuations of circumstance, buffeted by every change in the tide. Faith must come from within. It must be based on your ideals, on what you value, on what you believe is important. Only your values can drive your faith.

Values also determine what information we deem important and what information we will ignore. They help us give weight to what beliefs we hold and what beliefs we abandon. The more important you believe something is, the more time, attention, and effort you will put forth to make it happen. Thus, values not only serve as the foundation of our faith, they are what drive our decision to persist "in spite of. . ."

The problem with values however, is that while they are closely held, they are not always so apparent. In fact, it may take some time to unearth what we truly believe is important. That is why we need to periodically reflect on our practice and consciously remind ourselves of why we went into teaching and what we see as our fundamental role in our students' lives. We need to spend time reflectively thinking about our own values and how they affect our success in the classroom.

Of course, while it is easy to say that we hold certain values, our behavior will reveal what we actually believe. Therefore, it's not enough to simply reflect on your core values, you also must be alert for times when your practice contradicts your values. Do you say one thing and do another? Are you modeling the behavior you want to see from your students? Do you plan lessons that you know won't challenge your students enough because challenging them more will take more work? Do you give a test that you know